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### How Information Scarcity Influences the Policy Agenda

**Citation for published version:**

Boswell, C 2012, 'How Information Scarcity Influences the Policy Agenda: Evidence from UK Immigration Policy', *Governance*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 367-389. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2012.01570.x>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1111/j.1468-0491.2012.01570.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2012.01570.x)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Governance

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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# How Information Scarcity Influences The Policy Agenda: Evidence from UK Immigration Policy

## Introduction

Theories of public policy have traditionally been dominated by concepts of interest. Policymakers are understood to adjust policy in response to pressure from organized interests, public opinion, or in line with elite preferences. Such theories have dominated political science from its inception, whether in the form of Marxian, rational choice, public opinion, social movements or elite theory. Less explored is how policy might vary as a function of epistemological factors: different ways of observing or producing knowledge about policy problems. It seems reasonable to suppose that policy areas vary in terms of how accessible they are to observation and data collection, and thus in terms of patterns of information supply. And it seems equally plausible that such variations in information supply could make different policy issues more or less susceptible to political attention. Yet surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the role of information supply in shaping political debate and policy-making.

One notable exception can be found in the work of Frank B. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. In a series of publications, Baumgartner and Jones set out a compelling theory of information processing, explaining policy responses in terms of how policy-makers in the public administration pick up and respond to signals from their environments about policy problems (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Jones and Baumgartner 2004, 2005). However, the authors focus predominantly on the variable of information *processing*. While they acknowledge that information supply can vary across different issues (2005: 209), the authors do not systematically explore policy responses as a function of variations in the quality or quantity of information available on particular problems.

This article aims to help address this gap by developing some ideas about the explanatory role of information supply in policy-making, and especially political attention. It advances two central claims:

1. The first claim is that different policy areas are associated with quite distinct patterns of information supply. In some areas, there is an abundant supply of regular, reliable and publicly available information, typically produced by bureaucracies, law enforcement agencies and practitioners. By contrast, in other areas policy problems are difficult to identify and monitor on a regular basis, and there is no systematic or reliable data collection on the phenomena in question. Instead, problems are often identified only once an accident or crisis has occurred, or can only be observed through quite technical modeling.

2. The second claim is that these distinct patterns of information supply may in turn influence how information is taken up and responded to in political debate and policy making. In particular, we might expect that policy problems that are easy to chart on an ongoing basis produce more evenly distributed political attention, and more incremental adjustments; while those that are only observed sporadically through less accessible means produce punctuated attention and policy responses, as problems unexpectedly surface.

The paper explores the impact of information supply, focusing on the specific question of how it affects political attention. In the first part, I set out a number of hypotheses about the effects of information supply on policy, and especially political attention. In part two I conduct a plausibility test of these claims, through analyzing patterns of information supply in two areas: UK policies on asylum, and on illegal immigration. The analysis involves two steps. First, I map how policy problems are identified and monitored in the two policy areas, using newspaper reporting as a rough proxy for information supply. Second, I explore the relationship between information supply and patterns of political attention, in the form of parliamentary debate. I conclude by considering the implications of the findings for theories of public policy, and especially debates about incremental and punctuated policy change.

## **Information Supply and Political Attention**

### **The dynamics of information supply**

Over the past decade, Jones and Baumgartner have developed a highly compelling and influential theory of public policy, based on the notion of information processing (Baumgartner and Jones 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2004, 2005). Their account analyses the way in which policy-makers screen, select, construct and respond to the constant stream of information on policy issues emanating from their environments. Such information is supplied by a variety of sources, including the media, interest groups, political parties, think tanks and researchers. Indeed, the assumption is that there is a constant supply of information available in liberal democracies about issues requiring political action.

Despite the abundant and constant supply of information, though, policy change tends to be disjointed and abrupt. Issues intrude suddenly and unexpectedly onto the political agenda, even though they may have been present or accumulating over long periods. According to Jones and Baumgartner, this pattern of ‘punctuated’ political attention cannot be explained by changes in information supply (2005: 125). Instead, the locus of explanation for policy change lies in the behaviour of individuals and organizations processing the available information. Both are subject to bounded rationality: they are unable to process all of the available information in an efficient and accurate way, leading to biases and distortions of various kinds. Indeed, organizations tend to rely on crude and simplifying indicators for monitoring information in their environment (2005: 58), in many cases depending solely on media reporting (2005: 133). As a result, policy-makers frequently miss important cues from their environment about change, or they overlook new information that highlights already existing problems. Their monitoring of the environment is incomplete and unreliable, and signals about policy problems are only picked up once these have escalated to the point of crisis.

This produces a patterns of policy change characterized by ‘punctuated equilibrium’. Most of the time, policy-makers are happy to muddle through, introducing only minor adjustments to policies, and ignoring cues about the need for change. It is only once these signals resonate with the organization’s limited set of

indices that policy-makers are roused to action. Once this happens, they are likely to over-react to issues, triggering major shifts in policy.

This account offers an important corrective to what Jones and Baumgartner call ‘proportionate information processing’ (124): the idea that policy-makers are rational and efficient in responding to available information on policy problems. As a number of scholars have persuasively shown, the dynamics of policy change cannot be reliably explained in terms of proportionate responses to exogenous change (see, notably, Cohen, March and Olsen 1972; Kingdon 1995). Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that patterns of information supply are not wholly irrelevant to explaining policy change. While policy-makers may not be particularly efficient in processing information from their environments, the dynamics of information processing are likely to be at least partially influenced by the abundance, quality and availability of information on particular issues. Let me elaborate.

First, certain areas of policy are easier to monitor than others. For a wide range of social and economic issues, it is relatively straightforward for bureaucrats to procure regular, reliable data, and thus to identify any change in the nature or scale of the policy problem. This ease of monitoring may in many cases be attributed to certain characteristics of the problem. For example, some policy problems are easily identified through interactions with official structures – for example unemployment rates, health treatment, welfare support, or most areas of economic performance. These areas are associated with the regular supply of reliable bureaucratic data, gathered through various forms of registration or monitoring systems.

In other areas, it is simply not possible to collect this kind of data. For example, in policy areas addressing private and/or clandestine behaviour, problems may not be consistently captured by official monitoring. Indeed, in areas involving illegal behaviour, actors will attempt to remain invisible to official structures. Such behaviour may be captured periodically through law enforcement agencies (police operations or court hearings), through specialized research, or through the observations of practitioners. But such insights may capture only a small proportion of the problem, or may not be codified or collated into usable information. Another type of policy area which is inherently difficult to monitor is areas of risk, i.e. those areas in which the impact of interventions cannot be monitored on an ongoing basis through trial-and-error methods (Rüdig 1993: 25; Giddens 1994: 220). Instead, the impacts of decisions may only become evident once a crisis or accident has occurred. Examples

of this would include environmental damage, certain branches of medical research and the impact of new technologies (Beck 1996). We can also add risks associated with many areas of foreign and defence policy, terrorism, crime and migration (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982: 2).

A second factor influencing information supply is historical. The expansion of the modern welfare state was closely bound up with governments' growing capacity to monitor and analyze social, economic and demographic trends (Foucault 1994: 216-7). In particular, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a huge expansion in bureaucratic systems for collecting and processing data on social behaviour (Heclo 1974; Lacey and Furner 1993; Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996). Thus certain types of monitoring are well entrenched in bureaucratic culture and practice. It can be far more challenging to set up new systems for data collection once new policy problems are identified. At the very least, one can expect a lag in the development of data collection systems and practices. For example, it has taken considerable time and resources to set up systems for monitoring environmental change (Parr et al. 2003).

Finally, patterns of information supply may vary as a function of party political and interest group mobilization. Jones and Baumgartner acknowledge that in cases where interest groups are highly mobilized, their claims may have greater resonance with policy-makers (2005: 20-21). Yet this appears to be only part of the story. Where policy issues are the object of contestation, one can expect political parties, lobby groups and think tanks to have incentives to produce data and analyses to substantiate their policy preferences. This is especially likely to occur in technocratic policy areas, in which knowledge and data are seen as key resources in underpinning rival claims (Boswell 2009: 14). Under these conditions, participants in the policy debate may invest in commissioning research, briefings or organizing events to disseminate information about particular policy problems. This is likely to create an abundance of data and analysis on policy issues that are particularly contentious. Areas of contention are also more likely to elicit media interest, often prompting investigative journalism to unearth otherwise difficult to observe issues.

These three factors – inherent features of policy problems, historical practices of data collection, and political mobilization – can all influence the level and type of information available on different policy problems. Some areas of policy are characterized by an abundance of information, and include sources that provide regular and authoritative information. In particular, bureaucratic statistics are likely to

provide ongoing and reliable information on policy problems. In other areas, information is piecemeal and may enable observers to gauge only part of the problem. Examples of such sources would be accidents, crises or scandals unearthed by police operations or investigative journalism.

### **Information supply as a determinate of political attention**

How might these variations in information supply affect policy-making? Let us take the case of abundant information supply first. Where there is a plentiful supply of reliable data, we can expect there to be multiple and ongoing opportunities for identifying policy problems. Policy-makers and other participants in political debate – such as the media, interest groups and political parties – all have access to reliable information on policy problems. As a result, there are far more opportunities to identify and monitor problems. Insofar as there is political interest in airing such problems, then, we can expect a more proportionate distribution of political attention than would have been the case under a scenario of scarce information. One can also expect political attention to correspond more closely to either identified changes in the scale or nature of the problem, and/or shifts in political or societal concern about the problem. In short, participants in policy debate have the information available at their finger-tips, and can marshal it as and when appears politically appropriate. Of course, if there is limited political or media interest in an issue, then abundance of information supply will not guarantee political attention. The point is that abundance of information makes it easier for protagonists to identify and monitor problems where they have an interest in so doing.

There is a further dynamic that may produce more consistent and ongoing political attention in cases of abundant information supply. In policy areas benefiting from multiple and constant information supply, policy-makers are aware that policy problems are susceptible to monitoring by different actors. In particular, bureaucratic data is often an important source of parliamentary scrutiny of government activity. Thus the impacts of different sorts of policy interventions (or failures to intervene) can be closely charted. This means that policymakers cannot ignore or cover up policy problems, but must systematically monitor and adjust policies to try to address problems as they emerge. If they fail to do so, they risk being held to account by the media, political opposition or interest groups, who are also able to observe problems on an ongoing basis.

By contrast, problems that are only observable sporadically are likely to receive more punctuated attention from policy-makers. Such areas are more likely to conform to Jones and Baumgartner's notion of punctuated equilibrium. Government agencies are unable to identify or monitor problems on an ongoing or reliable basis, because of the limitations of information supply. The result is that they are likely to remain relatively inert most of the time, with abrupt and radical change occurring once a crisis reveals the scale of the problem. The relative neglect of such policy areas in the absence of crisis is reinforced by patterns of media and political attention. Policy problems in information scarce areas are less likely to be the object of media reporting or political scrutiny by opposition parties, simply because there are limited opportunities for identifying problems. And partly as a result of this, government agencies have low incentives for prioritizing the problem or ensuring adequate contingency planning.

However, once an episode does highlight a policy problem, it is likely to prompt a flurry of media and political attention. Where such focusing events surface, we would expect a sudden spike of interest in the media and political debate, in turn prompting swift policy responses. Such flurries of attention are reinforced by patterns of media reporting. The media show a strong penchant for reporting on major accidents, police operations and trials, which meet many of the criteria for newsworthiness: drama, human interest and moral consternation (Cook 1998; Mueller 1973). We might also expect debate and policy responses triggered by such focusing events to be more reactive than in the case of problems observed on an ongoing basis, as issues surface suddenly and unexpectedly providing little time for careful analysis and planning.

Table 1 summarises these hypotheses.

- Table 1 about here -



## The Case of Immigration Policy

In order to probe the explanatory power of information supply, I examine how far these posited correlations are born out in the area of immigration policy. I look at two sub-areas of policy, each with a rather different pattern of information supply. One of the areas benefits from abundant information supply, while the other faces major obstacles to procuring systematic and reliable data. The two areas are:

- *Asylum policy.* This refers to the legal and administrative systems in place for managing the processing of asylum-seekers' applications, their accommodation and welfare support, and the control and deportation of those whose cases are rejected. In the UK, trends in asylum are subject to ongoing measurement through bureaucratic data, with monthly Home Office statistics listing numbers of asylum applications, their gender, country of origin, and recognition rates. There are also figures on the detention and deportation of rejected asylum seekers. In addition, asylum-seekers regularly have appeals against negative decisions or deportation orders heard in court.

Based on the hypotheses, we would expect political attention to be fairly ongoing, facilitated by access to regular statistics, court hearings, and the occasional police operation. We may see a rise in interest if data show an increase in the phenomenon. But we are less likely to see major focusing events, since observations are fairly constant and frequently distributed.

- *Policy on illegal immigration.* This area of policy covers attempts to control the illegal entry, stay and employment of foreign nationals, through measures such as visa requirements, border controls, carrier and employer sanctions, as well as various forms of transnational cooperation to curb people trafficking and smuggling. The impacts of policy in this area are by definition difficult to observe, as illegal migrants attempt to remain invisible to official structures. This means that the phenomenon is not captured through bureaucratic data, and is only observed by policy-makers on a sporadic basis. One principal mode of observation is through law enforcement, including police raids and apprehensions, as well as court hearings. However, such enforcement activity only tends captures a small part of the problem.

We would expect such sporadic observations emanating from law enforcement or expert observations to produce a rather punctuated pattern of political attention. Politics may devote relatively little attention to the problem for long periods of time,

interrupted by a sudden flurry of activity as impacts become apparent. Once a problem does surface and gain mass media attention, however, it is likely to elicit considerable political attention.

The rationale for choosing two sub-areas of the same policy is to (as far as possible) hold constant a number of variables typically associated with policy change. In terms of public opinion, both sub-areas raise similar concerns about the administrative and social costs of immigration, race relations and the state's capacity to restrict and steer unwanted immigration. We can therefore expect social interests to be affected in a broadly similar way. Asylum and illegal immigration are both dealt with by the same organization, the UK Borders Agency of the Home Office. Thus we can also expect similar patterns of organizational information processing across areas.

Both areas also include a range of different types of issues, each of which may have a slightly different pattern of information supply. Thus there is scope for comparing not just broad policy areas, but also the dynamics of political attention on a variety of issues within each area.

In order to explore linkages between information supply and political attention, I carried out a quantitative analysis of several media and political sources. The first step was to map patterns of information supply in the respective policy areas. For this, I analyzed newspaper coverage of asylum and illegal immigration in two popular UK newspapers over a 7-year period, 2001-2007, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. The *Daily Mail* is the most popular mid-market tabloid in the UK, with an average daily readership of over 2 million; while the *Daily Telegraph* is the most popular heavyweight newspaper, with an average daily readership of around 650,000 (Guardian Online, 2011). I gathered data on the number of articles on each of these issues per month (918 articles in total), and coded them according to the source of the story (government, political party, bureaucratic statistics, courts, police, practitioners, researchers, lay observations, investigative journalism, international), as well as the main sub-issues dealt with under each policy area.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, using newspaper coverage as a proxy for information supply has its drawbacks. The media selects stories based on its own criteria of newsworthiness, and is likely to be biased towards police operations, court hearings and lay observations. Bureaucratic data and expert reports may be less appealing as sources. Thus gauging epistemic structure through media reporting may imply biasing the selection towards more populist sources, and fail to capture a range of observations from more obscure

or technical sources. These latter sources may have considerable influence on more specialized political debate and policy adjustment. Having said that, media analysis also has distinct advantages. While their observations may be somewhat skewed, journalists do draw on a wide array of sources, typically covering the full spectrum of information sources set out earlier in the paper. Newspaper articles also invariably specify the source on which the story is based, whereas political debates or government documents only tend to cite sources where this adds authority to their argument. Thus an analysis of print media has clear methodological advantages. Finally, the mass media has a powerful influence on political debates, serving not just as an indicator of patterns of information supply, but itself mediating patterns of observation by drawing political attention to certain policy problems. Thus media reporting is both descriptive and performative. While it is not my aim to add to the extensive literature on the media and agenda-setting, the acknowledged influence of the media on political debates provides an additional reason to treat its reporting as a good indicator of how policy problems are observed.

After mapping patterns of information supply in these policy areas, I analyzed the relationship between this information supply and political attention devoted to the issue. For this I drew on House of Commons debates, specifically the number of times the two issues (and the four most prominent sub-issues) were mentioned in parliamentary debates over the period. I focused on mentions in debates scrutinizing the government's record (including Home Department Questions and Prime Minister's Question Time) as well as motions put forward by backbenchers or members of the opposition. In general, I omitted debates on proposed government legislation. Such debates follow their own timetable, dictated by parliamentary procedure for approving bills, and thus cannot be assumed to be responsive to information supply. In the area of immigration and asylum, they also tend to cover a broad range of issues, making it difficult to identify correlations between policy proposals and the observation of particular policy problems. The exception to this was a bill very hastily introduced to deal with a loophole in law highlighted by a scandal involved illegal employment, in early 2004. The bill was introduced within two weeks of the scandal, and was a clear and direct response to the event.

### **Patterns of information supply on asylum and illegal immigration**

As a whole, asylum received more coverage than illegal immigration, with 598 articles over the 7-year period, compared to 320 on illegal migration (see Table 2). As might be expected, many of these articles were reporting on political debate and initiatives, rather than the phenomena themselves. Indeed, 38 % of all articles on asylum, and 24 % of those on illegal migration, were reporting on political debate about policy problems, rather than the problems as such. While such policy discussions reveal much about the politicization of issues, what interests us here is the break-down of non-political sources, i.e. information and knowledge supplied through lay, practitioner, research, police, court or bureaucratic sources. In this respect, there was a clear difference in information supply for the two issues, as illustrated by the rather different sources used in reporting for the two issues (see Chart 1). For asylum, the most important sources are court rulings and statistics, which account for 55% of all external sources. For illegal migration, police operations are the most important source, followed by investigative journalism and practitioner observations.

This is consistent with the expectation that policy problems in the area of asylum can be monitored through the regular production of official data on registrations and court rulings. By contrast, problems of illegal migration are monitored more sporadically through police operations. Where such police operations revealed a major problem, further observations were made through investigative journalism. In the case of asylum, investigative journalism was not required because of the ease of monitoring the phenomenon through publicly available data. It is also interesting to note that lay observations play a more important role in asylum reporting, to a large extent because of the more tangible distributional implications of asylum: in particular, decisions on where to locate asylum centres frequently provoked local protests. By contrast, illegal immigration was rarely accessible to lay observation.

*Table 2 about here*

*Chart 1 about here*

How do the sources for news reporting correspond to the timing of reporting? We would expect reporting based on ongoing sources such as statistics or court rulings to

be more consistently distributed over time, while more sporadic sources such as police operations would generate a more leptokurtic pattern of reporting. In fact, if we take the two policy areas as a whole, on first sight they both appear to be rather leptokurtic. Chart 2 shows the temporal distribution of articles based on external sources.

*Chart 2 about here*

Both areas show a rather uneven distribution of coverage over time, with the proportion of stories ranging from zero in some months to more than 6% of all articles in others. On closer inspection, illegal migration shows wider variance. There are two spikes of over 6% of all articles reported over the seven year period, and 16 months with no reporting at all. Asylum sees a relatively more consistent distribution of reporting, with the exception of a relative rise in interest between 2002 and mid-2003, and, within this period, a major spike of interest from January – March 2003. There are only four months in which there is no reporting at all on asylum. While there are no official statistics monitoring the level of illegal migration, the Home Office does produce regular and reliable data on numbers of asylum seekers. These figures suggest there is some correlation between media interest in the question of asylum between 2002-3, and a real rise in levels of applications. Levels of asylum applications rose from 148,550 in 2001 to 260,687 in 2002. The numbers then remained relatively steady from 2002 until 2006, when they began gradually to decline (UNHCR 2010). The leap from 2001-2002 was by far the most significant increase in numbers, and this may in part explain the level of media attention devoted to the issue in 2002-2003.

*Table 3 about here*

If we break down these articles according to the sub-topics covered, we can see a more pronounced divergence in the timing of reporting. In the case of asylum, the main issues covered over this period were the accommodation of asylum seekers, the deportation of applicants whose cases had been rejected, and the role of the courts in asylum policy (see Table 3). These issues received fairly ongoing attention over the seven year period, as shown in Chart 3. Indeed, this chart also partly explains the pronounced spike in coverage of asylum in early 2003. The media was simultaneously reporting on two separate issues over this period: the accommodation of asylum

seekers, and a contentious court ruling that overturned government legislation on welfare support for asylum seekers.

*Charts 3 and 4 about here*

By contrast, the two main topics on illegal immigration covered in the press show a far more leptokurtic pattern. The single most prominent issue over this period was illegal entry into the UK via the English Channel, and coverage was almost exclusively focused on migrants based in an accommodation centre near Calais (Sangatte) who were attempting to cross the Channel to England. The second most prominent topic of illegal labour was even more dramatically centred around a single focusing issue, the deaths of 23 illegally employed Chinese migrants while picking cockles off the English coast in February 2004. The third main issue covered in the press was that of migrant trafficking, which – unlike the other two issues – receives low-level, ongoing coverage in the media. The main sources for stories on trafficking were court cases, which tend to be fairly regularly spaced, as well as less obvious sources such as statements of international organizations or NGOs, again a fairly ongoing source. One can only suppose that the reason for media interest in this issue was its inherent newsworthiness (combining elements of organized crime, exploitation, sex and moral outrage), which kept it in the news despite the absence of accessible sources or any single focusing event.

In short, the data show that the two issues do have quite distinct patterns of information supply. Observations of asylum issues tend to be drawn from the various nodes of interaction between asylum seekers and official structures, notably through registering asylum claims (bureaucratic statistics) and appealing against negative decisions (the courts). The accommodation of asylum seekers in reception centres also provided opportunities for lay observations. Such observations were ongoing and easily accessible to journalists, contributing to relatively constant reporting over time. Changes in the level of media interest over this period appear to be linked to monitored changes in the scale of the problem, as captured by official data. By contrast, problems related to illegal immigration tended to surface infrequently, through police operations or (though less so) the courts. The lack of accessible sources often meant that reporters had to rely on their own observations in the form of investigative journalism. Such investigative journalism was almost exclusively

targeted at focusing events that had already hit the headlines, thus intensifying the pattern of extensive reporting on sporadic events and limited ongoing coverage.

The data do, however, show some important limitations to using newspaper coverage to gauge patterns of information supply. Newspaper reporters do not always wait passively for information from familiar sources to alert them to policy problems. Where the issue is sufficiently newsworthy – whether because of its compelling content, or because it has already surfaced through a focusing event – then journalists can go out of their way to access information from unlikely sources. For example, in the case of migrant trafficking a tabloid newspaper was happy to base news stories on statements from the United Nations or NGOs. And in the case of focusing events such as Sangatte, once the issue had hit the headlines journalists were able to gather their own information through investigative journalism. However, the use of such sources is not the norm for daily news reporting, and was far more likely to occur for sporadically observable issues for which there were no other readily accessible sources. For these sporadic focusing events, the media does not just gather information through existing sources, but actively creates new possibilities for observation through investigative journalism.

### **Information supply and political attention**

How do these variations in information supply appear to affect political attention? Earlier in the paper I put forward a number of hypotheses about this relationship. First, I suggested that policy areas benefiting from abundant information supply were more likely to elicit constant or ongoing political attention – assuming there was a general political or media interest in the issues in the first place. Second, I posited that political attention in such areas was likely to be more closely related to observed changes in the nature or scale of the problem than would be the case for areas with scarce information. In other words, there was likely to be a more proportionate relation between observed problems and political attention.

In the case of policy areas with scarce and unreliable information supply, I suggested that there was likely to be a low level of political attention most of the time, because of the lack of information. This would hold true even in areas that were highly politicized. However, once an event or crisis revealed a previously unmonitored problem, there was likely to be a flurry of political attention. Thus such

areas were likely to be characterized by far more punctuated attention, clustered around focusing events.

Based on an analysis of parliamentary questions and debates, it does indeed appear to be the case that sporadically observed problems generate a similarly sporadic pattern of political attention. The issues of illegal entry and illegal employment received limited attention in parliament for most of the seven year period under review. Illegal employment is only mentioned in 19 of the 84 months covered, and over half of these mentions are concentrated in just three months.

The punctuated treatment of illegal immigration issues was clustered around dramatic focusing events, such as the cockle pickers tragedy or the incidents of illegal crossing from the Sangatte reception centre, described earlier in the paper. Indeed, Chart 5 shows that debate on the two main sub-issues on illegal immigration is very much dominated by focusing events. As with the media, then, parliamentary debate shows a leptokurtic pattern, with little or no debate for long periods punctuated by a flurry of attention as the next focusing event occurs. In the case of illegal entry, the spike on the left of the chart describes reactions to the Sangatte reception centre fiasco. In the chart on illegal employment, the spike in early 2004 describes the media and political attention devoted to the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers scandal.

*Chart 5 about here*

By contrast, political attention to problems captured through ongoing observations by bureaucratic or law enforcement agencies was more evenly spread over the seven year period. The most prominent sub-issue on asylum – the accommodation of asylum seekers – was mentioned in 38 months out of the 84 covered. The second most prominent issue, the deportation of rejected asylum seekers, received at least one mention in 48 of the 84 months.

Even more interestingly, shifts in parliamentary interest on the issue of asylum-seeker accommodation roughly tally with available bureaucratic data on the problem. As we saw earlier, the number of asylum applications to the UK increased rapidly in the early 2000s, and especially between 2001-2002. As we saw with media reporting, this monitored change in the level of the problem appears to have influenced the level of attention to the question in parliamentary debates.



In the case of the deportation of asylum-seekers, the correspondence between parliamentary debate and official statistics is less clear. Home Office figures show that the level of enforced removals and voluntary returns of asylum-seekers rose slightly between 2004-6, subsequently falling from a peak of 16,330 in 2006 to 12,705 in 2007 (Home Office 2009). These figures do not appear to explain the rise of parliamentary attention to deportation issues in 2006-7. Instead, the spike in interest mainly related to a scandal over the government's failure to deport foreign nationals who had served prison terms in the UK. The scandal, which surfaced in April 2006, was only tangentially related to asylum seekers, so may rather skew the results.

The second point to note is that House of Commons interest in these issues did not closely mirror media attention. The two most prominent sub-issues on asylum – the accommodation and deportation of asylum seekers – received extensive attention in parliamentary debates, but not generally in tandem with mass media coverage. The implication is that parliament had its own sources for identifying policy problems, independent of the mass media.

*Chart 6 about here*

In the case of parliamentary debates on asylum seekers' accommodation and dispersal, we see a very high level of interest in early 2002 and again later that year, at times loosely following media coverage but often not. It also appears to be the case that parliamentary debate pre-dates media interest (e.g. in early 2002), suggesting that Members of Parliament (MPs) may rely on sources other than mass media to draw their attention to political problems. Parliamentary attention to the question of deportation is even more decoupled from press reporting. In fact, for both of these sub-issues, policy problems could be observed on an ongoing basis through accessible sources (in the case of deportation, through government statistics, and in the case of dispersal and accommodation through government statistics and lay observations).

This suggests that attention to such issues is not dependent on sporadic focusing events to unearth policy problems. Instead, debates are often triggered by observations derived from a close scrutiny of government data. Indeed, a large portion of parliamentary debate in the UK revolves around the opposition's scrutiny of government departments. MPs may also get cues from local constituents, with whom they have regular contact through constituency surgeries. Thus in a policy area

susceptible to ongoing monitoring through a variety of modes, we see a looser correlation between media reporting and political attention.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore the relationship between information supply on policy problems, and the political attention devoted to such problems. The first main claim was that different policy issues are characterized by distinct patterns of information supply. While some areas benefit from the supply of regular, reliable information from multiple sources, others pose major challenges in identifying and monitoring policy problems. The sorts of factors influencing patterns of information supply include inherent features of policy problems, as well as historical trends in bureaucratic data collection and political interest in producing information. The second claim was that these variations in information supply in turn affect political attention. In particular, abundant information supply makes it more likely that political attention will be constant, and will correspond to observed changes in the nature and scale of policy problems; while scarce information supply will be associated with more patchy and punctuated attention.

These claims were explored through looking at patterns of information supply and political attention in two areas of migration policy in the UK: asylum and illegal immigration. The analysis addressed two main questions. First, is there significant variation between policy areas in terms of the availability of regular and reliable information? The analysis of press reporting on the two issues suggested that there was a clear difference in patterns of information supply between the two policy issues. The phenomenon of asylum-seeking could be monitored on an ongoing and immediate basis, through the collection of bureaucratic data, court hearings, and lay observations of asylum seeker centres located across the country. Illegal migration could only be observed sporadically, usually through unanticipated crises or focusing events which provided opportunities to observe the phenomenon through police operations, practitioner observations or investigative journalism. These patterns of information supply produced distinct patterns of media reporting, with reporting on asylum being more evenly distributed, and reporting on illegal migration showing a

more leptokurtic pattern. Asylum reporting also appeared to vary as a function of a monitored increase in the problem in the early 2000s, as captured by bureaucratic data.

One exception to this correspondence between patterns of information supply and media reporting was the sub-issue of migrant trafficking. This area received ongoing attention despite the lack of accessible sources, and in the absence of any focusing event over this period. As discussed earlier, this seems to reflect the inherent newsworthiness of the topic, which attracted media attention in spite of, rather than because of, the availability of information.

Second, how do these patterns of information supply influence political attention? If we take parliamentary debates as an indicator of political attention, then we see a clear difference. In the case of sporadically observed problems, House of Commons debate tended to be closely correlated with unexpected and dramatic focusing events. There was very little debate on issues of illegal entry or employment except in the aftermath of such events. In the absence of such focusing events, MPs do not have access to reliable and ongoing sources of information on the phenomenon. Just like the media, then, they are reliant on unexpected focusing events to indicate the nature and scale of the problem. Once such episodes surface, there is a flurry of attention in both the media and in parliamentary debates.

In the case of asylum, there was a brief correspondence between political and media attention in 2002, probably reflecting the rise in numbers of asylum seekers as monitored in widely available bureaucratic data. However, for most of the seven year period there was limited correspondence between parliamentary debates and media coverage. This appears to reflect the fact that MPs were not as dependent on focusing events to alert them to policy problems, but could observe problems through other sources such as bureaucratic data and lay observations from their constituents. In short, the diversity of sources of information meant that different actors (politicians and the media) drew on the sources that were most appropriate to them.

Based on the data analyzed, then, this paper does support the claim that variations in the supply of information on policy problems could help explain variations in political attention. In particular, ongoing observation through multiple and easily accessible sources is associated with more reliable and continuous tracking of policy problems in political debate; while sporadic observation through unexpected

focusing events is associated with punctuated political attention and a dependence on media reporting.

The results may have looked somewhat different had we focused on other aspects of political attention, such as bureaucratic attention or legislative activity. Civil servants are likely to rely more heavily on bureaucratic data for information about policy problems, sometimes supplemented by practitioner and research reports. They have greater resources for collecting and analyzing information than do MPs, and are less likely than parliamentarians to draw on lay observations. These considerations suggest that the gap between information rich and information poor policy areas may produce even more pronounced divergence in bureaucratic attention. Civil servants are likely to rely heavily on their own internal sources of information for identifying and monitoring problems, and thus may be even more sluggish than parliamentarians in picking up signals about problems in information-poor areas of policy. This is an area that clearly would benefit from more research.

A second useful extension of the analysis would be to compare a highly politicized policy area such as immigration and asylum to a less politicized one. One of the hypotheses was that in information-rich areas, political attention was more likely to be ongoing, *assuming* there was political interest in the issue. In the absence of political interest, even areas with abundant and reliable information on policy problems may garner limited or no political attention. Again, it would be worth exploring how far the availability or lack of information makes a difference to political attention under the condition of limited political interest.

These qualifications aside, the paper's findings could have wider resonance for debates on how far policy change is incremental or punctuated. As we saw earlier in the paper, Jones and Baumgartner have challenged the classic incrementalist account of policy change as involving ongoing, marginal adjustments (*pace* Lindblom 1959, Wildavsky 1964). Instead, they argue that while incremental adjustments do occur, most policy change follows a leptokurtic pattern: long periods of inertia, followed by large-scale changes as information about policy problems comes to light (2004, 2006). What determines whether change is incremental or punctuated? Jones and Baumgartner suggest that this depends on patterns of information processing by policymakers. Where policymakers draw on a variety of sources, policy adjustments are likely to be more evenly distributed over time, in a process of 'rational adaptation' (Jones and Baumgartner 2004: 334). By contrast, where they are dependent on just

one indicator to alert them to policy problems this is likely to produce ‘disjoint and episodic adjustments’ (*ibid.*), i.e. punctuated policy change.

The analysis of this paper largely confirms Jones and Baumgartner’s observations about the role of information in determining political attention. However, it offers a rather different explanation as to why policymakers sometimes rely on multiple sources, and at other times on just one or two. On Jones and Baumgartner’s account, variations in information processing are analyzed as a function of how organizations select and pick up on the range of data available in their environment. My account explores how far variations in information processing may be linked to variation in information supply. Some policy problems are monitored on a continuous basis through multiple and reliable sources, implying that it is both easier and more expedient for governments to track and respond to such data. Political attention is more likely to track and respond to problems that are observed continuously, through a range of different modes. Other policy problems are only observed sporadically through a single source, meaning that governments are less able and have less incentive to adjust policy until a focusing event reveals the scale of the problem. Political attention in such areas is far more likely to be punctuated.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sources were classified in a way that could distinguish between ongoing, reliable sources of information, and those that are likely to be more sporadic and/or unreliable. Government sources included authorized policy announcements and statements by officials or politicians in the government. Political party sources included statements from opposition parties, or from members of the governing party that did not conform to the party line. Practitioner sources included professionals working or lobbying on immigration and asylum issues. Lay sources covered statements or reported opinions and experiences of non-professional or non-specialized members of the public who were affected by the issues in question (for example, members of the public campaigning against asylum centres). Investigative journalism covered any new (otherwise unavailable) information procured by journalists, including leaks to the paper and special reports on otherwise inaccessible places or events. International sources included statements or initiatives from foreign governments or international organizations. As explained later in the paper, the first two sources of ‘government’ and ‘political parties’ were excluded from the analysis of information sources, as they almost exclusively provided

assessments of policies, rather than information on policy problems as such. The classification of sub-areas was based on established demarcations of types of policy problems, as widely applied in both bureaucratic organization and policy-making, and within the migration policy and research communities.

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**Table 1            Information supply, political attention and policy responses**

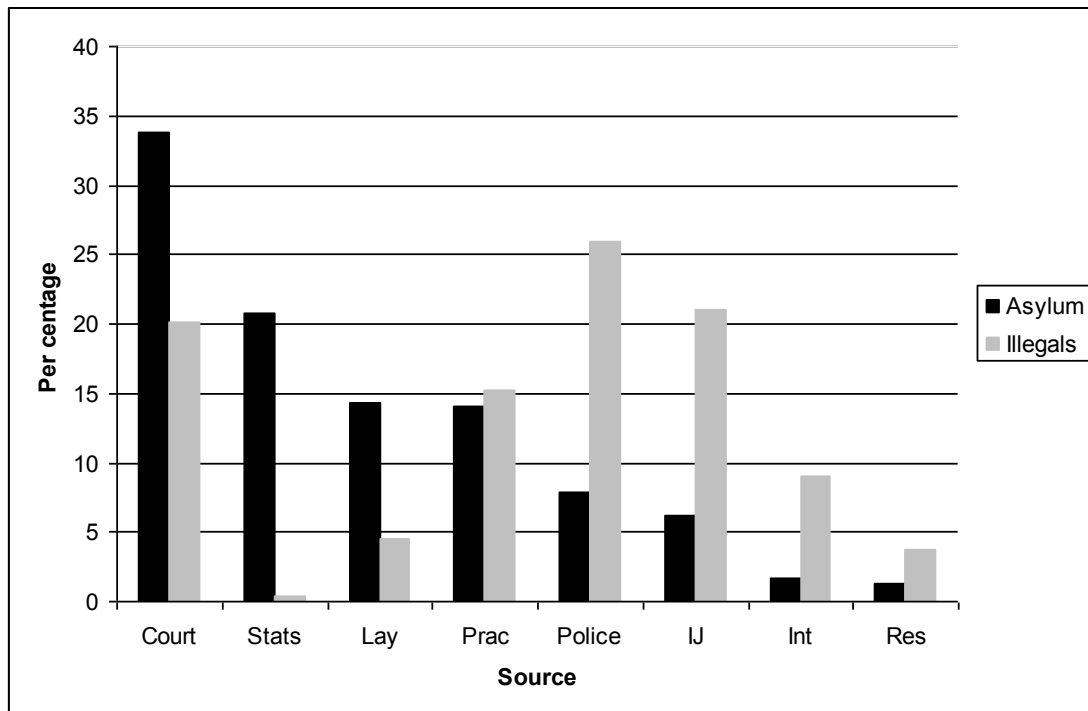
<b>Information supply</b>	<b>Political attention</b>
Abundant	Where there is political or media interest in the issue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• attention will be relatively constant/ongoing</li><li>• attention will follow monitored changes in the nature/scale of problem</li></ul>
Scarce	There will be a low level of attention most of the time, punctuated by a major spike in attention following unexpected events or crises that reveal previously unmonitored problems



**Table 2 Sources for articles on asylum and illegal immigration, 2001-2007**

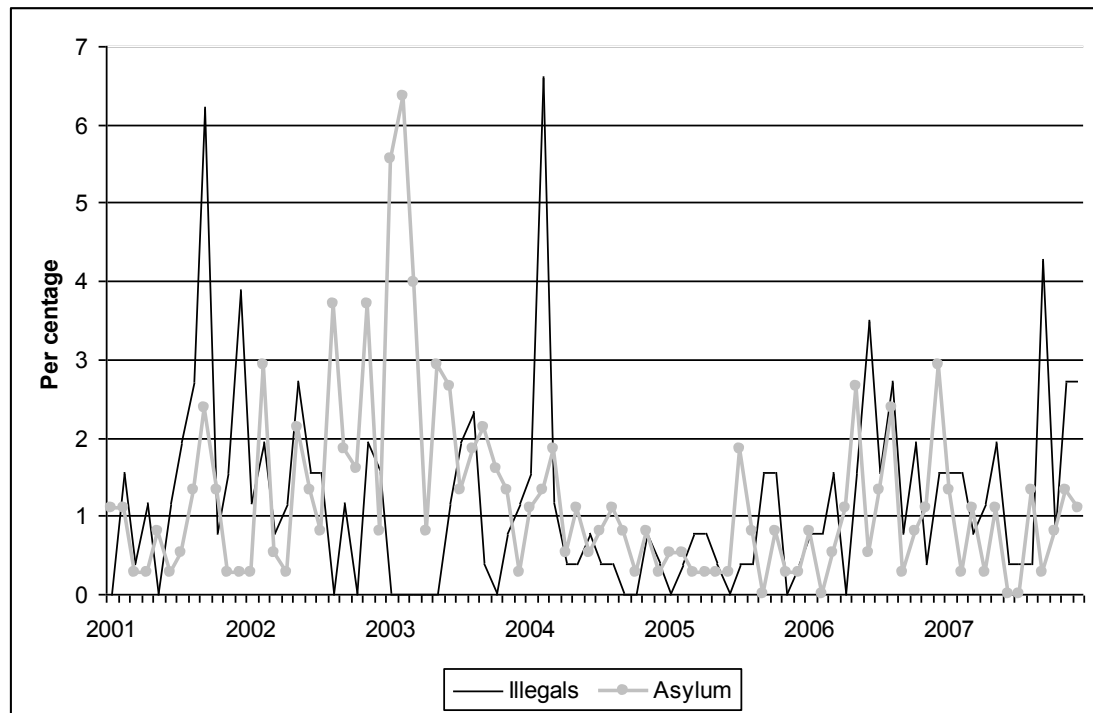
Source	Asylum				Illegal immigration			
	Mail	Tele-graph	Total	%	Mail	Tele-graph	Total	%
Government	56	77	133	22.24	27	29	56	17.5
Party political	38	57	95	15.89	12	9	21	6.56
Statistics	40	37	77	12.88	1	0	1	0.31
Court	59	66	125	20.9	17	32	49	15.31
Police	18	11	29	4.85	35	28	63	19.69
Practitioner	22	30	52	8.69	15	22	37	11.56
Research	3	2	5	0.84	7	2	9	2.81
Lay	25	28	53	8.86	9	2	11	3.44
Invest. journalism	13	10	23	3.85	23	28	51	15.94
Inter-national	2	4	6	1	15	7	22	6.88
<b>Total</b>	276	322	598	100	161	159	320	100

**Chart 1      Comparison of external sources for articles on asylum and illegal immigration, 2001-2007 (per centage)**



Notes: stats = statistical data; prac = practitioner sources; IJ = investigative journalism; res = research; int = international sources (foreign governments, international organisations).

**Chart 2**      **Temporal distribution of articles on asylum and illegal migration, 2001-2007**



**Table 3 Main sub-topics on asylum and illegal immigration**

Asylum		Illegal immigration	
Topic	No. articles	Topic	No. articles
Return and deportation	80	Illegal crossing via Channel	123
Accommodation and dispersal	67	Illegal employment	57
Court role in asylum policy	64	Migrant trafficking	32

**Chart 3 Main topics covered on asylum**

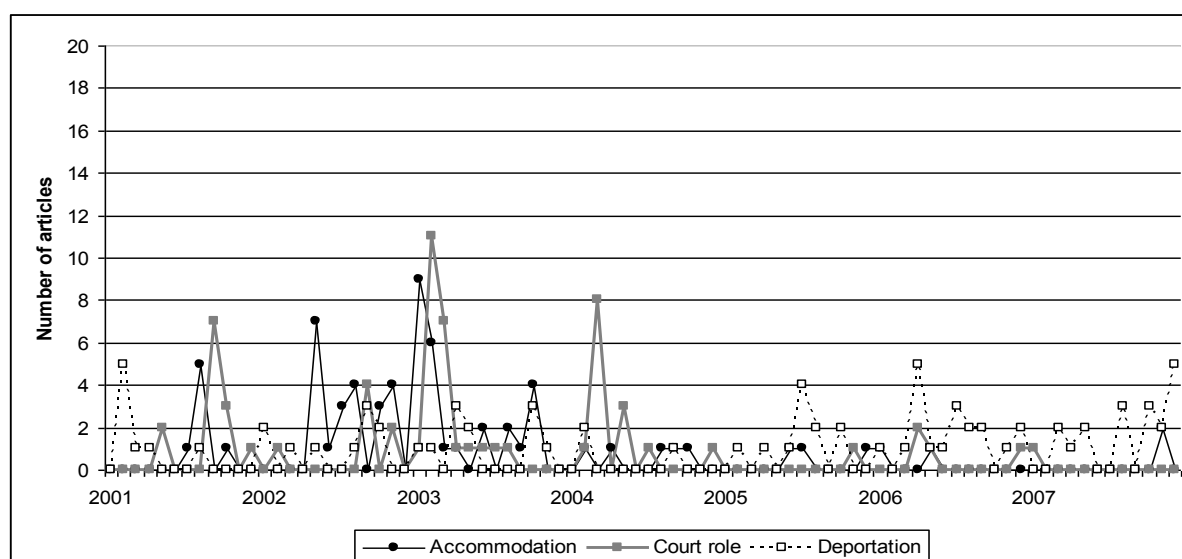
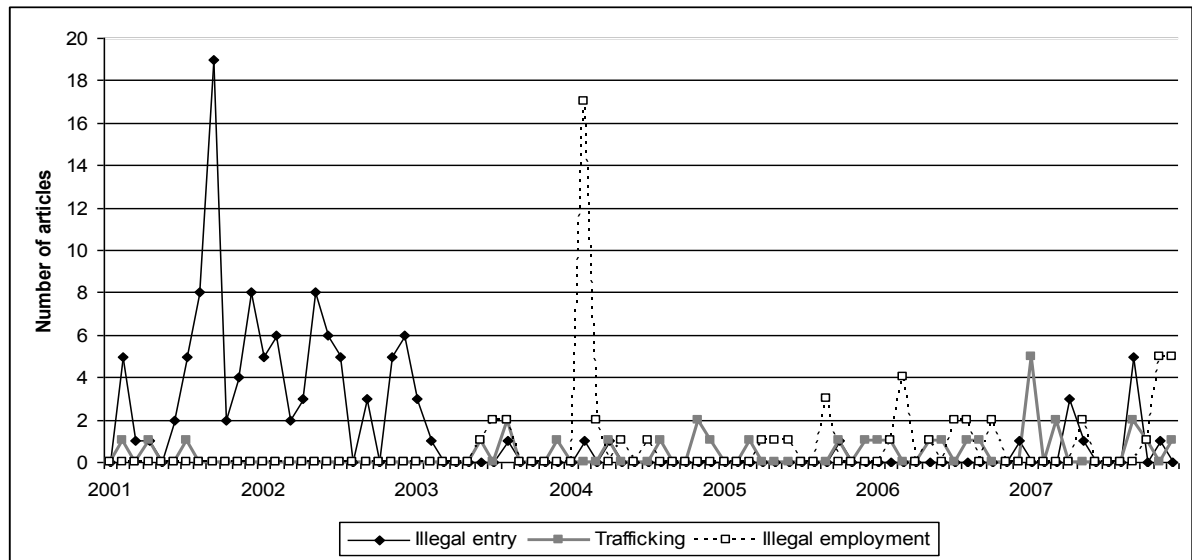
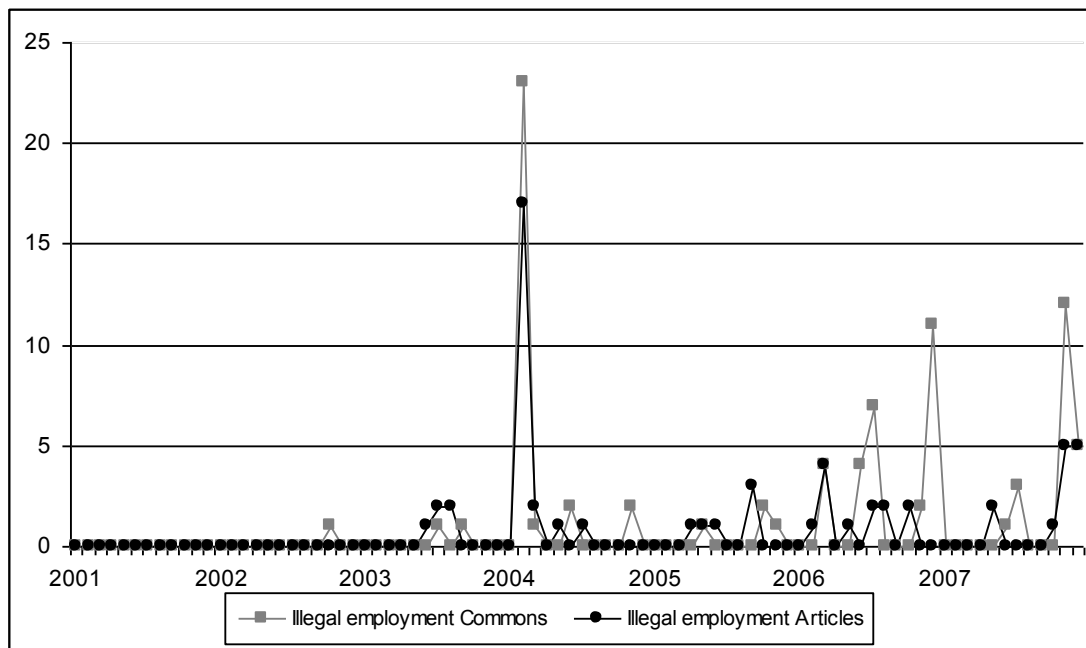
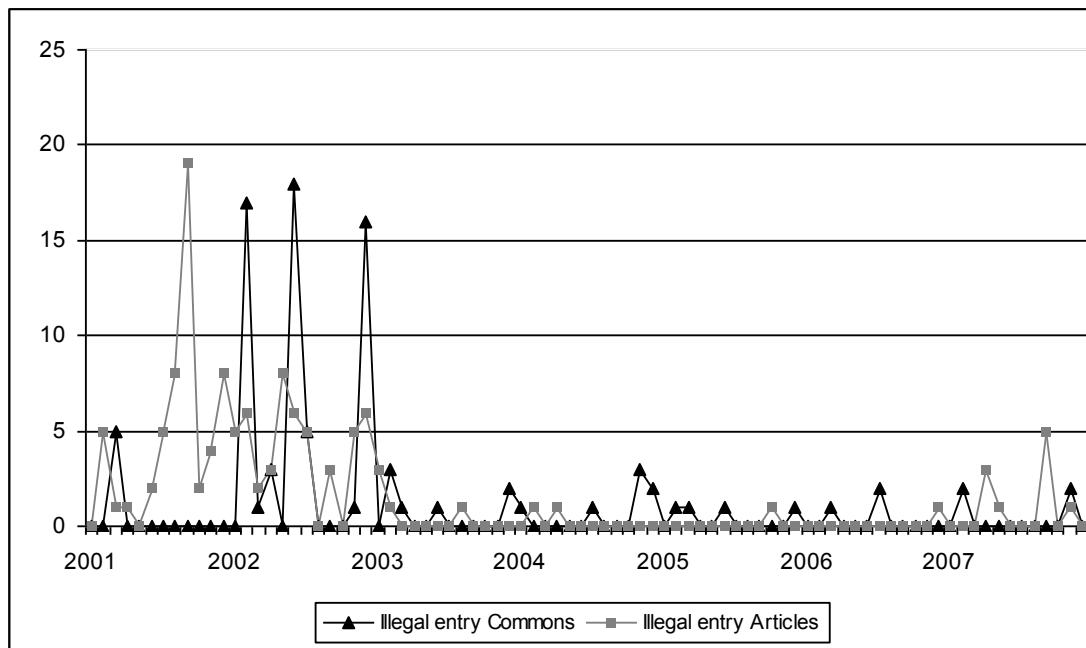


Chart 4

# Main topics covered on illegal immigration



**Chart 5** Newspaper coverage and House of Commons debates on illegal entry and illegal employment



**Chart 6** Newspaper coverage and House of Commons debates on deportation and accommodation of asylum-seekers

